

SHALL MAN UNMAKE GOD? THE NEW ECUMENISM SAYS NO

By James Hitchcock

Editor's Preview: The widest gulf in contemporary Christianity does not run between denominations, but cuts across them. It sharply divides orthodox Catholics and Protestants, who believe the source of their religion is God's self-revelation to His people, from liberal Catholics and Protestants who believe that everything religious, including God Himself, is man made and subject to cultural change. So argues James Hitchcock.

The author, a professor of history at St. Louis University, does not minimize the significant Protestant-Catholic differences over the papacy, the priesthood, the Mass, tradition, Scripture, ecclesiology, and attitudes toward the material world and secular culture. But he sees a significant softening in some of these differences since 1960, now quickened by recognition that the "demythologizing" agenda of liberal Christianity may extend to the discrediting of all moral and spiritual absolutes.

Practical morality, especially regarding sex and abortion, has become a focal point of Catholic and Evangelical cooperation against the liberals, and this area of common struggle is likely to widen as infanticide and euthanasia bid for increasing respectability in Western society. The old ecumenism of those who could agree mainly on the irrelevance of their respective traditions may be giving way to a fruitful new dialogue between two groups who still willingly and meaningfully call themselves Christians.

Religious differences between Roman Catholics and Evangelical Protestants on one level appear so deep that it scarcely seems necessary to catalog them. Strikingly, however, many Catholics today have come to feel that they have more in common with many Evangelicals than with some members of their own church, and vice versa.

In recent years there has been a coming together of Catholics and Evangelicals motivated by a growing recognition of the threats to Christianity itself posed both by the secular culture and by liberal Christianity.



Liberal Christianity can be defined as the assumption that religion is under an obligation to adapt itself completely to changing cultures. Ultimately, it does not believe in transcendent divine revelation but conceives religion as born out of the on-going "religious consciousness" of the human race. Virtually everything in religion, including finally even God, is regarded as a human creation, which human beings therefore can, and even must, change in order to meet changing human needs. By contrast, orthodox Christians believe that the source of their religion is God's self-revelation of Himself to His people.

It is at this point—whether or not God truly reveals Himself, or whether what is called revelation is merely a human discovery not essentially different from the most profound philosophy and poetry—that the widest gulf exists in contemporary Christianity. It is not a gulf which runs between denominations, but cuts across practically all denominations, running through the middle of many.

Those who continue to believe in God's self-revelation, whatever their denomination, are united by a common core of faith that hardly even needs to be rehearsed, since it is that which is contained in the historic creeds. At a minimum that core includes belief in the Trinity, in the historical Incarnation, in Jesus Christ as both God and man and as savior, in Original Sin, in the divine authority of the Scripture, the Virgin Birth, and in Christ's historical resurrection from the dead.

Church Visible or Invisible?

Obviously such a creed still leaves much about which orthodox Catholics and orthodox Evangelicals might

disagree, and most of their disagreements are not unimportant.

The most obvious are certain Catholic doctrines such as the authority of the Pope, the sacramental priesthood, and the Mass. However, other, less obvious differences underlie these.

Differing understandings of the Church itself explain most of the doctrinal differences. Roman Catholicism has tended to celebrate the "visible Church"—organized and incarnate—while the Protestant tradition has tended to see this visible church as a mere historical arrangement, far less important than the "invisible Church" of the saints.

The Catholic sense of tradition underlies certain Catholic beliefs not shared by Evangelicals. This goes beyond mere reverence for the past, which is shared by many people who are not Catholics. Catholic traditionalism is the principle that the teachings and practices of the Church over time themselves have normative authority in determining what belongs to the authentic Gospel. This in turn must be contrasted with the Protestant principle of *sola scriptura*.

In practice the Roman Catholic Church places much greater emphasis on the celebration and administration of the sacraments than do most Evangelicals. Catholicism recognizes seven sacraments, adding Confirmation, Holy Orders, Matrimony, and the Last Anointing, in contrast to the general Protestant acceptance of Baptism and the Eucharist. In addition, the Eucharist is the normal daily worship of Catholics, celebrated everywhere where there is a priest, and non-eucharistic services are both rarer than the Mass and less important. In practice, Evangelical Protestantism has emphasized the centrality of the preaching of the Word, without ignoring the sacraments, while Roman Catholicism has done the reverse.

Baptizing of the Profane

Although it does not reach to the level of dogma as such, Catholicism and Evangelicalism have often differed in their attitudes toward secular culture, with Catholicism over the centuries usually favoring an approach which could be called the baptizing of the profane, while classical Protestantism has insisted that Divine Revelation is a truth which should not be diluted.

The implications of this principle are many. It has led Catholicism, for example, not only to accept but even to embrace religious art, and to lavish tremendous attention on places of worship. Following the conversion of the Emperor Constantine, the Catholic Church systematically adapted many elements of ancient pagan civilization—art, philosophy, law, political organization—to its own uses.

The adaptation of pagan philosophy, particularly that of Plato by St. Augustine and of Aristotle by St. Thomas Aquinas, is perhaps the most momentous example of how Catholic theology, for better or for worse, has

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developed in large measure through the use of categories of secular philosophy applied to the understanding of Divine Revelation, while to many Protestants this has seemed almost blasphemous.

On the practical level this has led to a heavy Catholic emphasis on what is called "natural law"—the claim that the essential truths of moral right and wrong are knowable by human beings through reason, even apart from Divine Revelation, so that Catholic moralists have expended a great deal of energy expounding purely philosophical arguments for and against particular human practices.



To some Protestants this seems like a worldly enterprise which does indeed dilute the Gospel. Even many Catholics have been critical of what is called "casuistry" (from the Latin word for "case")—a system of moral reasoning which seeks to provide formulas which can be applied in every conceivable moral situation, and to devise rules which can be invoked to resolve difficulties. The Catholic response, while acknowledging the dangers of a wholly secular approach to morality, and also the danger of sterile legalism which casuistry contains, has been to say that human beings in the world need practical guidance, and that the general teachings of the Gospel need to be applied in specific situations, using secular insights where these are helpful.

Finally, Protestant-Catholic differences can perhaps be traced to a single profound difference which dramatically manifested itself at the time of the Reformation—differing attitudes to the material world. Roman Catholicism has been preeminently a religion which insists that everything spiritual must be expressed materially—in symbol, in sacrament, in ritual, in visible structure and hierarchy, in law—while classical Protestantism has required an austere spiritual religion, with faith as an interior disposition of the soul based on direct and unmediated response to the Word of God.

Changes Since 1960

Yet the past quarter century has brought about a significant softening of differences between Catholics and Protestants.

On the Catholic side, the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) took considerable pains to overcome at least

those Protestant-Catholic differences which were based on misunderstanding or on unChristian mistrust. This was true not only on the level of encouraging ecumenical discussion and cooperation but, more importantly, by a renewed emphasis on Scripture, and particularly by the affirmation that Scripture and tradition are not to be considered two parallel sources of authority, as they were often understood to be in the past, but that tradition is nothing more than the Church's own understanding of, and reflection upon, the Scriptures. There is no doubt that, since the early 1960s, many religious barriers have been broken down.



On the Evangelical side there have been signs of a desire to move closer to a Catholic position, in the sense of a greater emphasis on the visible Church, on worship, and on sacraments. The charismatic movement has proven to be an important meeting ground for Catholics and Evangelicals.

Prior to the 1960s the major movement within Christianity seemed to be toward the liturgical, dogmatic, tradition-minded churches—Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century there was a whole series of distinguished intellectual converts who embraced "high church" Christianity not in spite of its rituals and dogma but in a sense almost because of them. For whatever reason, this was the mode of Christian belief and life which for a long time seemed most attractive and most credible.

Since about 1960, however, much of the "action" within Christianity has taken place in the evangelical mode, which stresses personal religious experience, direct and individual approach to God, and the centrality of the Scriptures. The "externals" of religion have, in this mode, usually been deemed unimportant.

It is not easy to account for shifts in religious sensibility of this kind, but there is no doubt that such a shift has occurred, to the point, for example, where much of the vitality in contemporary Catholicism derives from the charismatic movement.

To Leave No Religious Stone Standing

Finally, there are the negative factors of liberal theology which I have already described, threatening the

common core of Christian faith and causing both orthodox Catholics and orthodox Evangelicals to discover between themselves much greater unity *even across denominational lines* than either group is likely to find with liberal members of their own churches—who either reject tenets of the creed or interpret them in ways which undermine their traditional meaning.

Modern Evangelicalism has been particularly sensitive to the dangers of “demythologizing” the Scriptures, a practice engaged in by liberal theologians and biblical scholars. It is a process which has belatedly entered Roman Catholicism as well, so that some Catholic biblical scholars appear to be running very hard to catch up with a century of liberal Protestant exegesis.

Orthodox Roman Catholics have also become aware of how the activity of demythologizing is being systematically applied to the Church—to its doctrines, its structure, and its history—in order to discredit ecclesiastical authority in the eyes of ordinary believers. Both Catholics and Evangelicals should be aware of how far the liberal agenda of demythologizing now extends. It aims finally to leave no religious stone standing upon another. Part of the wider modernist agenda is the discrediting of all moral and spiritual absolutes, and liberal Christianity, according to script, plays that role with respect to religion. Thus there is not even a possible basis for compromise between orthodox and liberal Christians, because liberal religion, in order to be true to its own principles, must ultimately call into question everything which has been believed. To a great extent liberal Christians operate within the Christian framework only because it is the one they have inherited and which fits their culture, not because they necessarily concede it any transcendent validity.

Inevitably, the most sensitive point in all this is practical morality, especially that area of morality which is always the most sensitive and emotional, because it is the most personal—sex. It is at this point that the modern secular world, often abetted by liberal Christians, has chosen to assault the Christian view of life most sharply and directly, and where it has arguably done the most damage. (When people change their patterns of sexual behavior, they tend to change their beliefs also.)

Except for contraception, orthodox Catholics and orthodox Evangelicals broadly agree on the basic principles, and most of the applications, of sexual morality, and can join in a common struggle both to defend the

ideal of Christian chastity from the various attacks made on it and to make that ideal plausible and appealing to the contemporary world. Abortion has been the most sensitive and the most urgent of those issues, an issue where there is already substantial Catholic and Evangelical cooperation. This area of common struggle is likely to get broader rather than narrower in the years ahead, as infanticide and euthanasia gain increasing respectability in Western society.

Orthodoxy, the Real Ecumenical Frontier

Modern ecumenism dates from certain attempts at cooperation across denominational lines first made prior to World War I. The period since the Second Vatican Council has often been called the Age of Ecumenism, and so highly publicized has been this activity that many people assume that all of the important work has already been done, so that ecumenical activity now has a slightly outdated and anti-climactic character to it.

Arguably, however, the real Age of Ecumenism is just beginning, in that the real ecumenical frontier lies not between liberal Protestantism and liberal Catholicism, whose adherents have often reached agreement by proclaiming the equal irrelevance of both their religious traditions, but between orthodox Catholics and orthodox Evangelicals, who take their faith seriously.

As true ecumenism is bound to be, this is a phenomenon containing both pleasant surprises and frustrating problems. On the one hand Catholics and Evangelicals do understand one another better, and have found more basis for common agreement and common action than anyone thought possible a quarter of a century ago. On the other hand, precisely because both sides in this encounter do take their faith very seriously, and do not believe that they are permitted to compromise that faith for the sake of agreement, this ecumenical discussion will take many years.

It is likely to be the only kind of ecumenical discussion which will mean anything, however, by the end of this century, since it is a dialogue between two groups of people who still willingly and meaningfully claim for themselves the title of Christians. For the logic of liberal Christianity, on both the Catholic and Protestant sides, now leads merely to a progressive watering down of Christian beliefs to conform to the changing spirit of the times and even to a final acquiescence in the emergence of a post-Christian age.



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